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ABSTRACT

In an effort to improve the motivation of students with negative attitudes toward reading and writing, five student-based library projects were designed in an intensive reading and writing course at New Jersey's Union County College. In the first project, student pairs were asked to find two articles from news magazines of the 1960's and 1970's that revealed something important about the United States, write a report on their findings, and share them orally with the class. The second project involved using the Reader's Guide to Periodicals to find articles on the same or a new topic in three different years, and then compiling a list of nine titles, writing up the best three, and making another oral presentation. The third project was based on the reading of Elie Wiesel's book, "Night." Students were asked to find information about the Holocaust from three separate sources, skim through each to discuss their findings, and write a report on what they had learned, making connections to the book. As the students finished reading Weisel's book, groups of three used the Reader's Guide to find current articles on the Holocaust, select five titles, discuss their reasons for choosing them, and justify them in writing. In the last project of the course, groups of students created an anthology of articles on television violence, date rape, and teenage drinking using the library's CD-ROM search indexes, such as Infotrac. Working together in small groups, in partnership with their teacher and reference librarians, students in the course improved their reading, writing, and library skills and built confidence in their ability to succeed in college. (KP)

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ED 387 194

A Semester in the Library with an English 087 Class: A Partnership Between Teacher, Students, and Librarians

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JC 950 499

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September 6th, the first day of the 1993 fall term, I sat in my office reading what my twelve students in English 087 -- a 6-hour-a-week intensive reading and writing course for students who score in the tenth percentile on the New Jersey College Basic Skills Test -- had written about themselves:

Liz: "I'm not very good at either reading or writing. I don't like to read or write about what I read."

Sonia: "I read slow and take too much time to comprehend."

Daren: "I read and write something only because I was told to do so. That is the only way I read and write."

Angel: "I don't like to read. I hate it. I only read if I am forced to do it. I failed a class in high school because I would not read a book."

I decided a fresh approach was needed -- a way of tapping into the energy students demonstrate when they are shown how to pursue an interest of their own. I wanted to get them into the library, right from the start.

First Library Project

That first week, as we began reading Peter Jenkins' Walk Across America, a narrative set in the late 60's to early 70's, I took the class to the second floor of our college library and set them loose among the news magazines of the 60's and 70's -- Time, Life, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report. Working in pairs, their assignment was to find two articles, one from each decade, that revealed something important about America -- to read each one, to write them up, and then to share them orally with the class.

As preparation for this first project, I had spent an hour with the reference librarian, Cathy Avino, who had not only suggested using the magazines and pointed out their location but had gathered together a collection of books on the 60's. This began the partnership with Cathy and with Barbara Bowley, head reference librarian: I would tell them in advance what I was planning for my students in the library; they would make suggestions and then be available to help students find materials. Throughout the semester, with each assignment, they, as well as the rest of the library staff, allowed my students to feel supported and, finally, confident. As Angel wrote on her end-of-term self-assessment: "I feel I have made most of my progress with the library. Before this class, I was never in the library. Now I feel I can go into a library and know what I am doing. I have also found that the librarians were very helpful. They always knew when to come and help you. You never really had to ask."

The following week in class, Fatima reported on Vietnamese war-brides who had married American servicemen and then come to America hoping to become wealthy. "It's funny because it's not only the people from Vietnam who think that. It's also people from my country, Portugal, who think that the Americans are rich. I found this article to be very interesting." Sonia drew parallels between her article on "The Decade of the Sixties" and our time. The strength of each student's voice was impressive. Because they had chosen their topic, in presenting it to the class they were the sole authority. Their peers listened.

Second Project

Hoping to build on my students' new-found sense of themselves as readers, writers, researchers, we began working on our second project on September 24. Students could either continue working with their topic from the first project or choose a new topic from the 60's and 70's. Using the Readers Guide their assignment was to find articles on their topic in three different years: compiling a list of nine titles, justifying these choices, then locating and writing up the three best. Both librarians Cathy and Barbara had observed that even in sophomore-level classes, students are often not able to use an index. As they pointed out, this skill is a necessity for using the new technology: both the Infotrac Academic Index and the ProQuest/New York Times. I knew my students would be using these by November. But I wanted to start with the Readers Guide, because each member of my class of twelve could be working in a different volume from the 60's and 70's, while I assisted them. I was beginning to think about the logistics of library projects -- how to have every student actively engaged, with no time lost waiting to use materials.

My students worked on this project for almost three weeks, struggling with the Readers Guide, with difficult articles that tested their weak reading skills, with missing volumes of Time or Ebony, with a temperamental microfilm machine. Four students felt compelled to change their topics in midstream. A high level of frustration was evident. Yet as Vygotsky suggests, learning is most valuable and leads to intellectual growth only when it challenges students, when it is ahead of their developmental level. Clearly the students were operating in what Vygotsky calls their "zone of proximal development." (Vygotsky, Mind In Society, p. 86, 1978).

At the end of the 60's Project, each student shared their research with the class; they spoke enthusiastically of the sense of freedom and accomplishment they had felt working on their project. Each had something valuable to say, something that they had struggled for, something they were an authority on -- an important benefit of making an oral presentation the last part of every library project. I became aware, too, that what I had been observing as my students worked in the library these past weeks -- the frustrations, the changes of direction, the false leads, the

dead-ends -- had only been a small part of their experience. With support, they had overcome these difficulties, had felt successful. As Mel said: "I noticed that I had confidence in myself and that I could complete my research paper on time."

Third Project

In class, we were now beginning Elie Wiesel's Night. Our next library project was to work in groups of three, finding information about the Holocaust from three separate sources, either books or encyclopedias: to spend thirty minutes skimming through each one; to discuss their findings with one group member; then, to write up what they had learned, making connections to Night. Sharing -- i.e., trading -- of books was encouraged, to foster dialogue among students in each group.

Our Holocaust Book Project took two weeks to complete -- a total of six hours in the library, researching, reading, and writing. As I read their reports, I saw that my students had succeeded in surveying and writing about some impressive titles:

Daryl, Keith, and Wilfredo:
Children of the Holocaust, Epstein
The War Against the Jews, 1933-45, Davidowicz
Encyclopedia Britannica, Volume 6, 1992

Fatima, Daren, and Liz:
Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor, Isaacson
Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust, Lanzmann
While Six Million Died, Morse
Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust, Eliach

Sonia:
Treblinka, Steiner
The Children of Izieu, Klarsfeld
Encyclopedia Judaica

Angel and Stephen:
The Holocaust Conspiracy, Perl
Witness to the Holocaust, Lewin
Surviving the Holocaust, Troy
One by One, Miller

Fourth Project

By now, seven weeks into the semester, my students had come to accept library research as a natural outgrowth of the questions they were raising about our class texts. As we finished reading Night, the librarians suggested having the students return to the Readers Guide for current articles on the Holocaust.

For this Holocaust Magazine Project, students worked in groups of three, each group choosing a two-year period in the Readers Guide from which to select five titles. Again, as with their earlier projects, they were to discuss the reasons behind their choices and to justify them in writing.

To minimize the frustration students experienced in their earlier work with the Readers Guide, the librarians recommended that we preview the possible articles students would locate in their search. We would then be able to guide them to suitable articles for their final choice. As I met with each group to go over their choices, I saw that the students were learning to make the kinds of inferences from the Readers Guide citations that would lead them to fruitful articles. I always left the final choice up to the student, trusting in their judgment to find a better article when they reached a dead-end. If our goal is to empower students to choose their own materials, following their own line of inquiry, we need to recognize the valuable self-learning that comes from trial-and-error. The library is the perfect place for such learning to take place.

By mid-November, when each group had written up their Holocaust articles and was preparing their oral presentation, a professor from the college came to talk to us about her visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. I asked Cathy to introduce my class to the ProQuest/New York Times on CD-ROM. Prior to this, to insure that each student would find an interesting and readable article, Cathy and I had previewed fifty titles on the Holocaust Museum. Each student then took their turn at the ProQuest -- punching in their search terms, scanning the titles, making their selection, then commanding the high-speed printer into action. Within thirty minutes, each member of the class of twelve was excitedly perusing their chosen article. They loved this new technology which allowed them to glance through many titles on the screen, view an abstract, even skim the whole article before deciding, and best of all, print and possess their prize themselves, without having to fill out slips, wait in lines, pay for the copier.

Instinctively, my students and I saw that a corner was being turned here -- something we had both been working for since our first week together in the library: the new technology, combined with their developing skills, was teaching them to become independent learners.

Final Project

The Australian educator Garth Boomer, in his excellent essay "A Case for Action Research in Schools" (from Reclaiming the Classroom, pages 4-13, ed. Goswami and Stillman, 1987) makes the point that building a curriculum around the naturally-inquiring brains of our students releases tremendous energy for learning. The trick for us as teachers is to seize that moment when our

students are engaged and, having pointed them in a fruitful direction, turn them loose to pursue it. Such a moment was now at hand for my students: They wanted to work together in their chosen groups; they had a topic, an issue that they wanted to investigate; and they wanted to use the library's CD-ROM indices to get their information. This final project -- creating an anthology of articles on:

"TV Violence -- Is Censorship Justified?"
"Date Rape -- How Serious A Problem Is It?"
"Teenage Drinking -- What Can Be Done?"

occupied my students for the last three weeks of the term, affording them lots of opportunity to apply their research skills to the new electronic data-bases. (The idea for a student anthology is borrowed from Marilyn Lutzker's book, Research Projects for College Students, p. 31, 1988)

As Barbara and Cathy prepared for each group's arrival by searching the New York Times and Infotrac Academic indices, our groups worked in class, writing down specific questions that they wanted to find answers to, related to their topic. As librarians know but teachers often forget, it's important for this preliminary small-group discussion and writing to take place in class, before students come to the library, so that students have some idea of what they are looking for.

As the first group of four students prepared to look up articles on Teenage Drinking on the Infotrac, I asked them to bring a printout of just the abstracts back to the class for discussion, before deciding on their articles. They could search titles, print out ten or more abstracts, then debate the merits of each article before deciding on the five best -- while a second group searched its topic. The advantages of working first with abstracts were threefold:

1. Students could choose many more titles much more quickly, even including some that looked interesting but did not at first seem central to their search.
2. The subsequent small-group discussion acquired an urgency as students struggled to defend their choice of articles based on a careful reading of the abstract.
3. Individual choice within groups became possible, since
   -- given a wider selection of articles from which to choose
   -- members of a group could each read different articles.

This process of selecting articles from abstracts is invaluable for teaching skills like close reading and making inferences that all students need when they do library research.

The value of student dialogue, too, cannot be over-stated. The group investigating Date Rape was talking animatedly about the titles on the Infotrac screen. Because they had chosen to research this topic and knew what they wanted to learn about it, their group

negotiation arose naturally, spontaneously from their interest -- not from me. This sense of being part of an academic community, so important for the success of first-year college students, required that students pool their knowledge and skills, that they work together. John Mayher, in his book Uncommon Sense: Theoretical Practice in Language Education (1990), urges that we transform our classes into "communities of learners" where students collaborate in creating and sharing their knowledge. The excitement and commitment of these developmental English students as, together, they searched out difficult readings, struggled to make sense of them, then gave their oral reports and answered questions -- this demonstrated our students' growing ability to investigate, to discover, to share. Again, the library proved the perfect supportive environment for this new student-centered learning.

For the last few weeks of the term, my English 087 students worked with a sense of purpose that was self-generated and inspiring for a teacher to see in action. With technical help on the Infotrac, the Times, and the Ethnic Newswatch from the librarians Barbara and Cathy, each group developed its own system for choosing and organizing their articles:

* When several of Daryl's articles from the Academic Index proved too difficult, his group helped him find more readable ones on Teenage Drinking from the Newswatch, a data-base of current news articles. This index, in fact, was a big hit, since the articles were usually easy to read and, like the Times index, it had its own high-speed printer.

* Daren, Liz, and Fatima worked as a team on their topic of Television Violence, Daren getting articles from the Times, Liz from the Ethnic Newswatch, Fatima from the Infotrac -- then each shared their best articles with the others. Sonia, meanwhile, worked alone on her related issue of Violent Rap Lyrics, although she also read several of the group's articles on censorship.

* Angel had persuaded her group to investigate Date Rape, a topic she was personally interested in. She took the lead for her group, making sure Stephen, Wilfredo, and Rod had a variety of articles to read, that each had read the most important ones, and that all were completing the conclusions to their anthologies on time.

The last day of the semester, December 14, each group takes a turn leading the class, at times reading parts of their anthologies, at times talking informally about what they have discovered about their topics. Their presence at the front of the room is relaxed, confident. They know their hard work has earned them the right to be listened to. Barbara and Cathy visit the class and are struck by the quality of each presentation. Although each student in the group speaks with an distinctive voice, their words blend, harmonize. There is an unmistakable music in their interaction. Two days later, when I mention this to Daren in our conference, he nods and says simply, "Yeah, we helped each other."

Postscript:

In their Final Course and Self Evaluation each student writes of the improvement they feel they have made in reading, in writing, in using the library to do research. They speak of the friendliness and intelligence of the library staff, the CD-ROM technology that makes finding articles easy. Most of all, they acknowledge themselves and their group projects in giving them confidence and the feeling that they can succeed in college. For first-semester college students -- especially when one looks back at the attitudes these students expressed fifteen weeks earlier -- this growing sense of self-confidence is no small achievement.

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APPENDIX: FIVE LIBRARY PROJECTS

PROJECT I

INTRODUCTORY PROJECT ON 60's AND 70's

What was America like when Peter began his walk in the fall of 1973? What was going on in the country-- and what had been going on since the 60's that gave Peter the view of America that he expresses in Ch.2 and that makes him 1st want to leave his country and then makes him decide to walk across America to see for himself?

Working in pairs, your job is to go back to the original sources of the 60's and 70's -- the weekly magazines that give us a picture of America in that period: Life, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, or any others.

Find 2 articles, 1 from the 60's and 1 from the 70's, that you feel are interesting and that bring out something important about America at that time: an issue, a problem, a situation that Peter would probably have been aware of. You will read through both of your articles, write them up, and then share them with the class on Tuesday.

1) Source (magazine)
   Title
   Date
2) A brief summary - What's it about?
   Why did you choose it?
3) Your analysis: What picture of America does it give?
   What important issue does it raise?
4) Connection to Walk Across America: Explain how your article connects to what Peter has been saying in Ch.2: What probably would Peter say about your article -- how would he react to the idea it discusses?

Each team chooses two articles -- work together!

PROJECT 2

READERS GUIDE RESEARCH ON 60's AND 70's

You've chosen your topic -- one that interests you. Now, working in at least 3 different years, look thru all the magazine titles on your topic in the Readers Guide.
Look in the 60's and 70's.
Next, choose 3 interesting titles from 1 year -- titles that seem related to each other and worthwhile reading. Copy down the complete entry on each article on looseleaf. Do this for 6 more articles - 3 each for 2 different years -- so that you have a total of 9 good titles on your topic, from 3 different years.

After each entry write down a couple of sentences saying why you chose this article -- what you think it may be about and what you hope to find.
Do this for each of your 9 articles -- You are really making some guesses based on the title and the magazine, etc.

Next, locate the best article from each year -- the most readable and informative. (It's probably upstairs in the back!) So, you'll be working with your 3 best articles, one from each different year (try to get 60's and 70's).
Choose 3 articles that fit together, that are on the same topic, that you can relate to each other.

For each article, read carefully and write up:
- Source, date
- A brief summary
- Why you chose it. (Copy the title page for each)
- What's interesting and why.
- What light it sheds on America at this time.

(One page for each article).

Then, after you've written a report on each article, spend a 4th page connecting your articles: What do they all add up to? What do they tell us? What have you learned from this project?

PROJECT 3

HOLOCAUST BOOK PROJECT

As background for our 2nd book Night, I'd like you to do some library research on this period in history.

Working with a partner, your job will be to find information from 3 different sources -- books and encyclopedias -- that will help you understand the historical setting and the events in Night better.

When you've found a book on the topic that looks interesting, spend 30 minutes browsing through it: Look at front and back covers, table of contents, read the 1st and last pages of some chapters, look in the index at the end. Then, spend a few minutes discussing your findings with your partner -- and have them share their book with you.

Now, spend 30 minutes writing up your book:
Author & Title & Date of Publication
In your words: What is the book about?
What's interesting and why?
What light might it shed on this period?
How might it help us understand Night?
(Here, you are making educated guesses, based on your 30 minute skimming of the book.)

When you've written up your 1st book, exchange books with your partner and browse thru this 2nd book, then write it up, the same way. You should have maybe 2/3 page for each.

Lastly, find a 3rd book or encyclopedia, read, share with partner, and write that one up.

After all 3, write for 10 minutes on everything you have learned from all 3 sources. Total: about 2 pages.

Bring your research report to class on Tuesday -- then we'll add magazine and newspaper articles. And start Night.

PROJECT 4

HOLOCAUST MAGAZINE PROJECT

Now that you've looked into books on the Holocaust, let's use our skill in working with the Readers Guide to research some magazine articles on this topic. Please choose two classmates to work with -- a team of three.

First, decide on which two-year period you want to work on:

Period 1: 1986 - 1987
Period 2: 1988 - 1989
Period 3: 1990 - 1991
Period 4: 1992 - 1993

Working together, your job is to look under the heading "Holocaust" in the Readers Guide for your period and find titles of articles that look interesting, from magazines the library might have. Each group should write down seven titles, total. For each citation, explain in a paragraph why you chose it, what it might be about, what you hope to find by reading the article.

When your group has decided on your titles, I will meet with you to check over your list and to make recommendations. You are then ready to begin your search: each member of the group will choose to read and write up one article to start:

1. Author, source, date
2. Briefly, what's the article about?
3. What's interesting to you and why?
4. What connections can you make to our book Night? How does your article help us understand this period in history better?

When you've written up your article, exchange articles with a group member, read, and write up a second article. Talk about the articles with your group, so that each of you is getting a good understanding of the information in each article: what's interesting, what's puzzling. Help each other. We'll be spending time in the library this week and next, working with our articles.

Your completed project, due in two weeks, will require each student to read, write up, and report on five Holocaust articles. You may do your oral presentation as a group.

PROJECT 5

FINAL ANTHOLOGIES

For your anthology, you must choose a total of 4 magazine articles and one New York Times article to write up - 5 in all. Please select readable, interesting ones that relate directly to your particular issue -- even if you have to go back to the Infotrac several times. (I would like to see each article before you start to work on it.)

Also, you need to have 2 original articles out of your 4 -- so nobody in your group has these 2 articles. And each of you has an original Times article of your own. For each:

Source, date
A brief summary of what it's about
What light you feel it sheds on your issue
Why you feel this information is important.

This write-up for each of your 5 articles might come to 1 - 1 1/2 pages.

Finally, your anthology must have:

A. An introductory page, explaining your interest in your topic, the specific questions you hope to find answers to, and why this issue is important for us to know about.
B. A conclusion page in which you sum up what all your articles tell you and reflect on what you have learned about your issue and the questions you set out to find answers to.